FIELD

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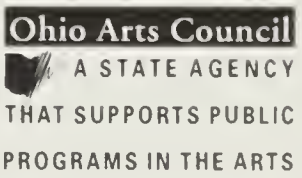
CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS

NUMBER 64 *SPRING 2001*

OBERLIN COLLEGE PRESS

www.oberlin.edu/~ocpress



FIELD gratefully acknowledges support from the Ohio Arts Council.

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Subscriptions and manuscripts should be sent to FIELD, 10 North Professor Street, Oberlin, Ohio 44074. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Subscriptions $14.00 a year/$24.00 for two years/single issues $7.00 postpaid. Back issues: $12.00 each. Contact us about availability.

FIELD is indexed in *The American Humanities Index*.

ISSN: 0015-0657

CONTENTS

LIKE HISTORY

For a time, it is as they told me and
as I have read, elsewhere: he
is a lake, to pass over which is to

know myself passing then
gone over, he is glass
upon glass until mirror I've

but to look upon, touch — am I not at once
one definition of *touched*,
visible? For a time —

Music.
Singing.
A song mostly whose

changes seem, like history, more
delivered than sought out, less
sought out, even, than

simply the case despite (looking
back) appearance — the way that, in
what we know to be random in its

arrangement, we find all the same
a deliberateness that finally
nothing, if not pattern, if not

plan explains, somewhere:
any street, for example, to
all of one side of which the wind's

moving has cast down from
what will eventually swell with
pears (to be either taken or at

last let go) the still-pink but
brown at their furled and
as-if-tattered rims

blossoms.
— Look at me.
What am I now but,

variously, that side of the street that
holds the blossoms,
the one that doesn't,

the life that walks between the two, then
turns the necessary, inevitable (only
wait for it) sharp

corner, soon, I am — I
shall have been — to the street
he, darkening, equals?

CANOE

The brow of a man who,
when he takes to his own
another's body, means

somewhere also *I would*
like to help.
The lake a compass,

the canoe its needle,
ourselves inside
that —

The way
what's missing can go
unnoticed beside what's there,

until we notice: these
were his arms,
now raised, now dropped,

lifting.
Slight pockings,
like the chips that give

historically more character
to marble retrieved
after long burial,

bust of
the emperor Hadrian
in that period just

past the death, on purpose,
of his boy favorite.
Lilies,

lilies.
Watch, he said; and
bringing the paddle

up, vertical, leaving
only the blade submerged
— stilling the blade —

he dragged the water:
we were turning....
Lost,

as a thing
can be, beyond all calling
of it back — none, anymore,

calling —
It seemed related to
what I'd heard

about cars, ice,
steer always
into the skid's direction —

those lessons where
to have learned means nothing
next to having had

to apply.
I want forgiveness to be as easy as the gestures for it, it
isn't, is it?

KNIFE. BASS. WOMAN.

The wood handle thick
as a cattail. Two pegs the color of pewter
anchor the blade. In my left hand, the knife.
Eggs balance on the tip, glutinous
tapioca. In my right hand, the bass hangs,
its zippery spine loose. Each stroke
brings down a host of scales. Skin rolls
like hose. Over soaked paper,
I understand why a man rapes
before dawn: for the red-rimmed eye,
fearful and waiting. For the puff
of cheek, love catching
her throat. The woman on Vine
wore flannel. Maybe her skin smelled
like pilings near the water's edge —
wood-rot, sweet. I wonder
what book she thumbed, what kept
the lightbulb burning. A man carries
sperm like a black suitcase.

DESIDERATUM

I rinse apricots, trace the cleft
in their buttery skins.

Milk-yellow, blush, fiery gifts.
Each fruit an envelope

wrapped around its stone.
I rub the scent of Tilton,

Royal on my thumbs. Slice fruit
into quarter-moons, soak

flesh in rum, cool from the cellar.
All winter I dreamt of lifting

the bottle I'd tucked between
two rafters, of shattering

glass. Now, the voyage.
I hand you a bowl

lined with festival boats.
Not one bruise.

God love you if these
are not enough.

HOME

I didn't know I was grateful
for such late autumn
bent up cornfields

yellow in the after harvest
sun before the
cold plow turns it all over

into never.
I didn't know
I would enter this music

that translates the world
back into dirt fields
that have always called to me

as if I were a thing
come from the dirt,
like a tuber,

or like a needful boy. End
lonely days, I believe. End the exiled
and unraveling strangeness.

MY THREE BROTHERS

When I was my three brothers and me,
when I was
four of us.
I had a voice like a wind,
hands like a cliff,
heart like a forge.
The lakes painted me.
I have been lifted by
the poplar trees.
The rivers washed me for themselves.
The laundry women tried to catch
my image.
When I was
my three brothers
and me,
when I was four of us.
The meadows loved me.
They carried my voice
and with it they cut off the creeks.
Myself delighted me.
I had my brothers.
(I had the upright walk.)
These were my brothers:
my brother, my brother, and my brother.

translated by Goran Tomcic

TRAVEL

In other places they have different words
for *claws*, for *mother*,
for *transport*.
Or is it that language transforms?
The painted houses in Golden Lane
look like dolls' houses
or stage sets.
Was anyone ever that short or that small?
Spectators jammed the square
when the occupants were pulled out —

Should we put a period to things?
At least the hours chime the same
in every tongue.
At least the astronaut flies as high
above every part of the world.
There she is in that shining capsule
as we look up with envy.

Don't keep asking me what I think.
I'm trying not to think.
We could pull her from space
as if from drowning
though she might not want to come back.
But what would that prove?
Primeval forests line the hills
above these medieval towns.
Does everything come back to desire?

Last night I dreamed I was in Prague
and woke to find myself here,
the castle above me,
and the old city across Charles Bridge,
"Robert the Devil" playing in the state opera house
and Astor Piazzolla, for heaven's sake,

at the Kafka Center.
Who could invent reality?

The far right's rising again in Austria
as the shadow of Ottla, Kafka's sister,
floats over Terezin and then Auschwitz
where she was gassed
with a thousand children.
A dog next door howling at the moon,
Czech beer served on the terraces,
and the Vltava overflowing.

FOOTLOOSE

Like-it-or-not —
my ghetto —,
and I haven't budged in ages.

I used to take what I needed
and move on.
I used to oil the coat

of my horses for a quick sale
but now I fiddle
with odometers —

you get it?
I sit cross-legged
and smoke

while I read the cards.
You'd be surprised who
believes them.

Behind me,
the great flat field
where what matters is view,

thousands of hills,
and beyond, mountains,
sea to the west.

But just this one room
I've settled into,
ceiling pressing low

on my otherness,
my rug and mattress,
my inkling of me.

BLOSSOM RIVER DRIVE

My childhood friend sent me his novel forty years later, the street with the gentle, sickly boy, with traffic of caterpillars (that no longer drop in), with Pete the unseen indoor sot, with garden cloche front windows, with an assortment of ordinary neighbors who put to use the decorations of each season to become one lyrical whole. Fish ponds and filled-in ex-ponds, the twine and rigging of willow glades, hazel thickets, rose plots, and the evergreened back of an old farm mansion from whose land the rest of ours was carved. That garage with its combusting rags. Canadian first names, Mexican surnames, Italian singers, Greek restaurateurs. Pass the schoolyard *now* and I see transparent silhouettes at play. An air of dolls and ropes and balls. The gowns of brides begin toy-size. Bantam grooms. Narrative rabbits and wolves as familiars. Capes and eye patches, petite, prophetic. That is how we toyed with the mature, the grown. We were complete; only later did we winnow, forget, pretend not. The doll's grandchild is someone's daughter the mechanic. The novelist's father died, bereaving the book, practically a grandson. Now we are caught up, aren't we? A long-running trouble for beauty sustained us, or the beautiful would not be visible for us to see involuntarily today. Or to catch by ear: in first words, as they attune to this present.

CHILDREN OF THE VILLAGE

(In Memory of Isaiah Shoales)

His short life had been one long boy's thought, and now they were illustrating it with pictures. At the funeral his condition was painted by bold preaching: "Death is a moving van." A snowy dove perched in an ivory cage beside the boy. Its eyes turned here or there, for hour after hour of prayer. Probably it was not overcome by the choir singing in the way we are awed, mornings, by the oratory of wings. The part-Siamese heeded my torch song as he lingered on the sill to watch a breeze. He understood the verse's "weather"; he understood the rhyming "feather." Phoebe's blown glass piano at last had been unpacked from its memoried box. Demise of her ardor for pianos, so I inherit miniature grands from my own child. Ardor — if you look at the instrument in its dusty casket, you see it is frosted with tracery of a fragile too-high-to-hear Diabelli variation. For actual music, we have pines. For remembrance, scent of mandarin blossoms in the dark. What kind of a childhood is it for one diagnosed as a stranger? When Ruma brings over her cello for the trios, the child lingers and listens. She plays with the sound of sticks under the crabapple the woodchucks frequent. Some worn ivories of an upright are her first. A perching bird intrudes, flies through and up into the ceiling, up the stairs, so high that the parents are awed and fretful. Soon after that, this child began to reason out the Baroque, which she played like an understanding, an accord between her favorite diagram in Gray's Anatomy and a milkweed pod as it bursts.

UNDER THE PROJECTION BOOTH

A blond hero's frightened face fills the screen,
the light inside his eyes darting, trying to flee.

Around me, men's bodies stink
of sweat, *soju* and spicy food.

A tiny TV hangs from a ceiling of pine boards barely
half a foot above his face: he must be buried alive.

On his screen, a bald man in a black suit, hunched
over a desk, laughs through an intercom at his captive.

These bright images fly overhead, inside that tube of light;
floating cigarette smoke makes it seem a roiling river.

A tall boy presses his shoulders against my chest,
gropes around for my zipper, fondles my soft cock.

Inside me, a dry leaf bounces on a stream's surface until
a green leaf rises through the white current, and swims.

"I can turn off your oxygen at any time, you know.
Feel how helpless you are? How weak, in my power?"

I wrap an arm around his waist. Grab at his pants.
He swats my hand away. Speeds up his strokes.

My forehead rubs his neck. My skull
feels like a porch light left on at noon.

The hero's face sweats. His tongue washes his lips.
"Don't even try to speak now," his captor chuckles.

"I can't hear you unless I turn on your mike,
and frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

My trick's thin spine digs into this big belly,
the warm skin and the hard bone between us,

our minds, our silent realms, half an inch apart,
me sensing, everywhere, the other's delicacy,

the cascading weight, electric pressure of the self,
his breath, his tongue, heavy inside this mouth.

SUSTENANCE

1.
I somehow thought the magpie mine
simply because I had admired it

here and there, bobbing on barbed wire
in what was once free sage, landing

in abandoned rice paddies,
their owners undersold,

its feathers black and white and blue,
a screaming bruise.

2.
I thought I had to have
a reed car seat mat: it had,

woven into it, that symbol
of longevity.

I wanted to cut, in the center, a hole
to shove my neck through, folding

that armor over my shoulders, me
a warlord in a brand new breastplate.

3.
Inches away
purred a lady

protecting her baby: its chew-toy,
a Tupperware pie slice container,

a white plastic wedge
shaped like a wing,

could have been called sculpture,
say, "The Dove of Other Floods."

John Gallaher

GENTLEMEN IN TURBANS & LADIES IN CAULS

So these guys are laying bricks, ladies
and gentlemen, in the desert. A way

to spend the day, one supposes. Nice long desert. There.

And let's suppose that in this desert there's a palm. Some
to the left, and some

the right (so let's think about the desert this evening), these guys
biding their time in the volumetric background.

And they've palms to hit the palms (no clouds

all afternoon). Clippity-clop and habitual, they get up
real early, ladies and gentlemen. I can assure you, in the morning,

hitting the bricks. And after lunch they've all

afternoon. They know that
from A to Z, building

the land between this water and that water. Take this desert

for instance, call it A; and Z, could it in any way resemble a
desert?
(Laying bricks & all that.) One cloud

maybe? And a brick's a brick's a brick . . . as in

There goes a brick of a guy. All cobalt and beige
in the desert air, this mantle and their materiel. Under

conditions. And here they didn't think

they'd like bricklaying at all. One might maybe even whisper
to one. When alone maybe. In the desert in our Sunday best

with straw and mud (all the fine ideas),

there's a palm. And it's getting on
toward evening, ladies and gentlemen.

We're going to the desert to lay bricks. We're going
to try and cheer ourselves up.

NEVER ENOUGH DARTS

A bear walked right into town last week. It was a big one, too, a male. It pushed open the door of the pizza place and ate all the pizza off the customers' plates. People just sat there with their mouths open, impressed. Then he just walked on down the street and went in the hamburger joint and did the same thing. The cook managed to call the police. The police came right away, but they had used up all of their knock-out darts at last Friday night's high school football game. So they just followed the bear at a polite distance. When the bear was full it found its way out of town. The people I talked to seemed delighted to be getting back to nature. As long as they had enough to eat they weren't going to complain.

IN A PAST LIFE

This man named Gordon came over to me at a party last week and said he had known me in a previous life. "You were a shepherd," he said. "Oh yeah," I said, "that sounds nice." "Actually ," he said, "you were a crime boss pretending to be a shepherd." "That doesn't sound like something I'd do," I said. "Yeah," he said, "but you were very good to your six children and two wives." "Two wives?" I said. "You had other people do all the killing," he said. "So basically a nice guy, right?" I said. "Except if somebody crossed you. Then, look out, there's nothing you wouldn't do, cut off fingers, gouge eyeballs," he said. "You're really full of shit," I said. And I made a move as if to poke his eyes out. He jumped back, terrified. "You're definitely him," he said. "All that's a long time ago," I said. And I held my hand out to him, "Come on, let me get you a drink." "But I was just making that stuff up," he said. "I wasn't," I said.

AN ASTERISK NAMED FRED ASTAIRE

for Halvard Johnson

Star descending a staircase, five-pointed,
at least when clothed. In his tux, he is,

made all of plasma, super-
fluid and hot. Another cool that burns. The first

has no legs, will not endure: it's not a work of arc,
no asterism. I have a cold that burns me up.

Or flu. Fred cascading
ramifies in fever's eyes.

The squirrels are playing
walnut-soccer, it's October, on the roof. The cat is mad

domestic. He fields it all through glass but doesn't
have the physics for it: reflex over 2

divides the will. Fred, on the other foot,
and just those two, behind the glass wall touches down

like a spacesuit on the moon,
inhabited, but only just.

THE FERRY LIES DOWN ON A SHARP ROCK

as if a taxi found a cliff in Manhattan
heretofore unknown therefromaft water
bone cold

the octopus like a softball in its mitt

Naxos with its doorway into nowhere: two
columns, one
lintel, either way you look it's world, more world.
The drowned there too.

It's true. There's been a rock with a doorway on it
for three thousand years.

Why does the argument go on?
Why can't someone look through?

ALL MY BOXERS

The Korean boxer sells lemonade
from the back of his truck. His daughter
chops mint on the dashboard. Sugar

Ray Robinson slept with a feather
in his hand, beat his wife
with a sack of oranges, chewed ice

cubes before every fight. I found
a pair of boxing gloves at Goodwill
yesterday, the balloon of the fists

raisined, the red leather flaking.
One last dream of going back
to New York to find you waiting

on the steps of the library,
at the mouth of the lion,
sipping your lemonade

while the businessmen jab
dollar bills at the Korean
in his sweatsuit and didn't he spar

with Hagler? Hearns? It's his cleaver,
his doesn't speak English,
his broken thumb spooned to split lemon.

His daughter knows luck is smaller
than a mint leaf; superstition
a stick for boys to play with.

Ray Robinson shares an apple
with his wife then tumbles
into bed, exhausted. The sick

black paint of the air when he fell,
the doctor speaking Spanish.
Teeth, shoelaces, and so many beautiful

hats. In Texas, they say it never
snows but once every year
everyone is wrong. Once

in bed I brought you
mint tea and you told me
about your cousin who fought

132 and died in Seoul
before the Olympics,
his head a pumpkin

on a stretcher, his eyes
chipped ice? blood oranges?
I can never remember exactly

the way you look bunched up
or joyful. The fit of you falling
away to photographs

in my pocket where I'm constantly
ducking my hands to avoid
cigarettes and telephones and when

Ray Robinson was finally through
his wife cracked his neck
one more time then flew

to Paris and never came back.
This is how things end.
The Korean sharpens the cleaver.

His daughter buys sugar. I am pounding
the gloves together in front
of a two-dollar mirror. Count to ten

and the snow will be red.

ESTONIA

My brother's yellow car
in the middle of the ocean

bound for Estonia
where leaded gasoline

still leaks onto the
broken streets of Virtsu.

Mothers tie lanterns and bells
to the wrists of their children,

a string of bouncing lights
through the forest to school.

We had spent the day ripping out
the catalytic converter.

We made his car toxic again.
I said *why help everyone else?*

He waved his rust-
covered hands in the air.

He shrugged his shoulders.
He drank the last of the ginger wine.

My brother weaving a thatched roof.
My brother driving a tractor.

My brother with the wolves
and a village of ice-blue eyes.

Is it envy or concern? His wife
is dead; my daughter's toys overflow

into the neighbor's yard.
Sit 'n Scoot, Big Wheels, soccer ball.

The things you leave behind
and everything else that surrounds you.

The part you take out
to poison a stranger's child

in a country you'll never visit.
Everything seems indecent now.

The schoolchildren freeze
in Soviet concrete while

my brother teaches them *please; thank you;*
the potatoes are no good this year.

The schoolchildren are broken
icicles and chipped lead paint.

The schoolchildren drag my brother
to an abandoned coal mine.

My brother keeps reaching under
the earth. My brother with a shovel

and the end of the world
in his pocket, the picture

of *some college girl* — that's all
she was. I meant it. I won't

say her name. Is it love
or a man digging lumps

of coal no one will ever use?

EXILE

That hollow sound a dog makes,
that fret and tear at the morning.
And your voice yesterday evening
up on the hill calling the lost cat.
Two syllables floating through the woods
back down to me. You say you have no
singing voice, but the notes were pure.
On pitch. Melodious.
I listened to you calling the cat and I stared
at the racks of flowers in your garden.
Petal, stamen, bud in evening light.
As if what you'd left behind had flowered.
The country you might never see again —
Burst of yellow flowers.
Red poppies splayed open; roses
climbing to the second floor window,
that dalliance at the center.
It's the beauty of loss.
The pretty of it, the pure stem.
What we do to shore up rotten planks,
that hole in the world through which
what might go does go and keeps on going.
There should be some sort of lock-down
to keep what we love in one place.
Keep that choir from coming towards us through the trees.

TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

I made mistakes in French.
I made mistakes on the French train.
I made mistakes in the hotel.
I was tired
in a French town.
I got lost.
I made bad change.
I could not understand the woman
I was traveling with. In English.
We were driving
a car through cicadas.
It's a translation problem.
That one place in the city of.
In the town of.
Something you thought
you could find,
but can't locate.
Perfect posture,
beautiful eyes, but
you had to wait for her
everywhere.
If you wanted her.
Village of. City of.
The town you could get lost in.
Train hurtles
through the station
and does not stop.
I made mistakes.
I was riding
in the wrong coach.
I was sitting backwards
in a foreign tongue.

SPINDLE

The sinister hands at the spindle
spun darkness, sister.
They designed handcuffs
and shackles. They built gallows
during the night in a shadowy square
where they led the light to be hanged
while rifles stood laughing.

The longer those nooses swayed
the stronger the light grew.
You should have seen it, sister,
it didn't fit anywhere —
pregnant with a thousand sons.
Its brilliance bleached the gallows
and breached the ropes and chains
but couldn't clean the dirty hands. They stopped
and turned the spindle upside down
when they heard the rifles sobbing.

Soon a glowing spindle spun
under shining hands, spinning the horizon.
They wove wings for birds
and long hair for young girls.
They created love, sister,
and you could hear it roaring in the blood
as the rifles fled stumbling.

translated by Sinan Toprak and Gerry LaFemina

FIREFIGHT

It lasted, then it didn't last.
Smoke lingered low,
an animal ashamed.
The field could not absorb itself.
Then there was no one there.
A lone snake slid in and out
of the pools like a question mark
trying to find its sentence.

YELLOWSTONE, BURNING

As in pillars of devouring fire, as in a pair of honeymooners
driving west, as in pines that stood as still
as bridesmaids in an allegorical painting . . . The fire
is everywhere, the ranger said, but safely distant.
The radio gave us updates about wind velocity and the new
ecology of burning. That morning
and everything in it already warm to the touch —
your sunburned calves, clouds of smoke
drifting into next week like leftover punctuation,
the way you hung your hot hair
over the railing, as if the abyss below needed combing too.
When I replay smells, geysers drift in,
each duplicating the one before, spraying us
with a sulfury command to touch our secret parts
to the sky, to let the sky diagram our local fires.
And the creatures, like extras in a documentary, tried
to warn us about being trapped in flesh.
A flock of blue-footed something skedaddled.
A papa buffalo played nuzzle-nuzzle with our car.
But we were too buried in ourselves, the breezes
too forgiving. You ate finger foods and lotioned your legs.
I read Rilke and a year-old *Newsweek* until I grew
hungry for the skin beneath your skin.
The whole afternoon turned *almost*. We almost swam
the Firehole River with those beautiful, unshaved Spaniards.
We almost joined the search for a widow's poodle.
We almost, I swear, slipped out of our bodies
into something slower and deeper. Kiss me again inside
and out, under, on top of. Such terrible stanzas of smoke.

FUNERAL BUFFET

Blasphemous I know to fill my plate while the dead
mumble about eternity. If only I dared
to peek in the casket, if only I could confess
to a priest who grasped the epistemology
of hunger. The table is as long
and lacquered as a bowling lane, full as a king's
pantry, and I'm always arriving famished.
If only I knew how I lost my shoes
and who fitted me with this embossed silverware.
Such obscene abundance — quiche,
tortellini, figs, borsch, game hens stuffed
with giblets and sage and all the vices
of the overfed. If only I knew these great aunts
buttoned up the back like religious dogma,
if only the croissants didn't glisten so.
Listen, dark cousin, avatar, or whoever
you are — I'm famished with waiting, full
of this world and its pottage. When will you break
bread with me, lead me across the water,
let me use your face as a mirror?
If only the dead could bury the dead, if flutes
and peasant dancers, if a proper manual,
if my unclean lips and a little rain. If eating
weren't always a substitute for something else.

THE BLUE WILLOW CURSE

You and your Pavarotti carols, your 4-wheel drive,
heading through the snow to Aunt Marcella's,
aren't you ever satisfied? Do you need a retinue
of hard-wired angels? You're so preoccupied,
thinking of the imminent novena for Our Lady
of Kansas City, Our Lady of Baby Back Ribs,
planning your side dish. Isn't there enough
hunger in your own back yard, wiping his boots
on the welcome mat, saddle-soaping his hands?
Yes, Ma'am, don't mind if I do. You can't get
enough, can you, of his knuckles bruised
on the hardware, of his manners of rust.

May a twisted wind blow every saucer and bowl
of blue willowware from its shelf on your hutch
until you eat from an iron pan. May the pan melt
on a forgotten burner and the smell fill your house
while you dream of yellow rain and your house burn
so that every photograph of your mother and father,
all evidence of their dire existence and the existence
of the elm that overhung their porch and every moth
that fluttered on their screen at dusk, every postcard
every thank you letter from a niece every loveletter
from a soldier or hack or taxidermist or perfect fool
is ash and every particle of ash is alone,
in a shimmering hush you'll never know.

THE WORD (FATHER) OCCURS TO ME

My pop lies in a hospital hammock, strung by two nurses.
My father is asleep, he's not getting any better.
He isn't trying. The demon that occurs to me is *spoiled*.

Oh, no, he says. No. No no no no. Where am I and how
did I get into this mess? His excrement is bright green.
The word that occurs to me is *extinct*. There's
a better word in traditional Chinese. There's no word
for father sick in hospital, awake for only a moment here,
moment there. *I'm like the Cheshire cat* he says. *When*
I'm here, I'm here. You have to be watching.
In simplified Chinese, you might say that as one word.
I do not know that word.
Where've ya been? Galavanting? he says.
Then he falls asleep for one month and seven hours,
a little nepotism in the sheets, little looser in his limbs and feet.

Always talk to me as you would a tiny gorgeous baby bringing
you a delphinium petal. Use only those words, that tone.
Be pleased at my perfection; assume the best, count on me.
Else, I disappear. Like a warning cough.

I say write your name, honey. He writes in sinking letters
N E M O.
My mother says this means he's sunk real low. Lost his zest.
Zest? I say. Zest nearly killed us all.
Zest is small. It's a dash. Mom: No more Z words for you.
I think he is Nemo, cruising down there, pinching octopus butt.
I think he's grinning and lazy and in love with Nurse Judy's
whiteness.
As an idea.

I wait outside Door 213, I wait for him, for months. My role
is to mark his life, his heavy smoky breaths, with youth, with
organs.

Calorie count in progress! Let us know if you give this patient
any food of any kind! The word that occurs to me: *pachysandra.*
Nematode. Alabaster. Alone.

The word that occurs to me is the word for biting into cheese.
The kind of scratchy cheese that gets better but also bigger, too
noisy
and spoiled. Noble on the tongue, and all night with me, with me,
with me. That's the word that occurs to me, in my language,
for father
That's the word that comes to mind.

BUCKY DITCHED ME

Bucky ditched me starboard.
Seagreen Irish eyes and only two
Lies. *I love you*, and *I love you*.
Bucky ditched me in the grass.
Into the blue dishes and pine needles,
Ditched me for Pamela Ball,
For Charlie X, for a sail, for a sky.
I said sorry, I said sweets.
I said Bucky ditch me right here
Right now. Say my hair is beautiful
Is your Sleeping chains. Say anything at.
All I'm old. All I'm sad. When Bucky held
Me, in his sea cold arms. I leaped. I thought
She leapt for joy. When I was her.

MIMOSA

The way I know I am happy?
No part of me remembers anything.
I am mummified with light:
into the canopic jars go my sadness, my anger,
my aging, my failure.

A jacket, a bony wrist showing,
tentative, vulnerable,
slim as the boy hawking
in the marshes for the king.

A tension of the jaw,
the look of hunger,
I want him at my breast.

The sun's rays enter
over my left shoulder,
and gild the hall mirror
where I stand imaged in its eye,
hearing his step on the stair.
He's at the door offering flowers.

Soul whispers:
you sleep eyes wide open, in your box,
alongside you a votive light,
a pin shaped like a salamander,
a lock of blond hair,
a number five pencil.

I lift the flowers from their green tissue.
Mimosa *pudica*:
when stroked its feathery leaves curl up shyly
its tiny flowers balls like ancient granulated gold.
He bought them for me,

wanting to say things he couldn't say
to give pleasure he can't give.
How will I thank him?

I enter the somber kitchen, stand at the low sink,
fill a vase and trim the stems
before plunging them into the water
imagining the moment
when the stem goes faint, then quickly revives
more open than before,
water wicking through its veins.

WHAT SHE FOUND

Her camera focused
on the yew's tenacious spreading;
on a drop of rain in a cup of Lady's Mantle;
on the sumac impaled on the link fence
wedded to the chain that scarred it,
until the surgeons took her breasts.
Then scar and knot came home. Jealous for herself,
she entered her own landscape the way
she walked once in a river's dry bed.

If under the ribs her heart beats, lungs pump,
she still grieves. She writes *beasts*
or *breads*. She mocks, says
deadheading the roses,
she names them *was* and *gone*,

and she shoots each pore,
each ridge of skin, magnified
so the body blurs to a sag of shapes
that she will force herself to record —
not the doctor's cheerful scenario —
but her harsh tracking of these new horizons
that show us what she cannot love — but does.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY COPERNICUS

Somewhere in the woods, an acorn falls.

It is the center of the world.

So is the odd rock
no one's seen yet.

And someone clambering down
the steep path finds himself

to be like a voice
breaking the silence of cedars,

speaking to no one
and everything
all at once:

the everything spoken to
seems to listen
closely, and without a word

for miles,
all the way out to the end
of a broken pier

in nowhere, which is pink.

PSALM

Emptying the trash,
going to sleep at night,
just daring to speak
in any language to anyone:

Our prayers are answered,
even if the words we say
                are just dreamt-of
admissions of love to strangers,
unsent letters
shoved away, forgotten, at dawn,
like street lights turned off
as the sky begins to gray
                above the black fields —
all of this is being written down somewhere.

See. Even that ladder leaning up against the barn
wants to make you feel better.
See how easily the dew collects on its white slats,
the way the morning hardly breathes?

See that man who drinks himself to sleep,
how his face is pressed against the kitchen table —
see how the light from his kitchen shines through the window of
    the old farmhouse?
Somebody sees that light.

BACKYARD ASTRONOMY

The crockery of Heaven clanks and wanders
in a movement so immense it seems
like stillness when we're out back
on a blanket, watching the dark dust
enter roofs and leaves and then
part vaguely for the airplanes, pinkish
and edgy and slow as the approach
of a disaster. We're a family, we're in love
with what it seems we should be feeling
and we don't know what to say.
God or the color of our sensation
brings small, barn-shaped impressions
through our shoulderblades, which makes us
shiver and think of other lives
behind us, to which we might turn
smiling and confused. But we don't.
We say, "Look at that bright one
over there by the plum tree, the one
wiping its eyes."

AMOR ORNAMENTI

It is easier to love beautiful
creatures, sweet scents, and lovely
sounds than to love
God, the eighth-century scholar
Alcuin said, so God invented
passementerie, ornamental
trimming for curtains, pillows,
and gowns — gold braid, silver
beads, the silk-and-gilt
tinsel of passion, translated
from the Greek *pathos* from Latin
passus: suffering, to suffer—
never passé, never out of
fashion. Howling human, winged
monster, lion-headed
body projecting from a gutter
to carry rainwater clear
of the wall: gargoyle—
as in *guttur, gargoul,* as in
gutter, in throat — narrow stony
astonished passage — liaison
to what? And where is syntax,
sentence, *my liege,* which leads to
sacrilege, the stealing
of sacred things? The presentation
and movement of the cape to
attract, receive
and direct the charge of
the bull is called
pase. The Indian name for
the buckeye tree: *hetuck,*
"eye of the buck," for the glossy
brown orbs that split
their green lids like seams.

NARRATIVE

The colonnades on St. Peter's Square
embraced Bernini's ellipse and many stories
beneath me was Rome, its own
roman a clef, home of
the Pantheon of Marcus Agrippa, built
under the Pantheon of Hadrian
where Raphael was later
buried: shell of a turtle, no place
with entrance and light
placed at the center
of its coffered dome: *
little star, asterisk, unattested
existence not established by documentary
evidence, but reliably inferred
*see *hole* *see *light*
*see *shape* of the space made
by music, a room
we can hear: pierced ceiling
that will miss the dark, which was
so clear and clever.

RHAPSODY

No one says it
anymore, *my darling,*
not to the green leaves
in March, not to the stars
backing up each night, certainly
not in the nest
of rapture, who
in the beginning was
an owl, rustling
just after silence, whose
very presence drew
a mob of birds — flickers,
finches, chickadees, five cardinals
to a tree — the way a word
excites its meanings. *Who*
cooks for you, it calls, *Who looks*
for you? Sheaf of feathers, chief
of bone, the owl stands
upon the branch, but does he
understand it, think *my revel,*
my banquet, my tumult,
delight? The Irish have a word
for what can't be
replaced: *mavourneen, my*
darling, second cousin once
removed of memory, *what is not*
forgotten, as truth was
defined by the Greeks.
It's the names
on the stones in the cemetery
that ring out like rungs
on a ladder or the past
tense of bells: Nathaniel Joy,
Elizabeth Joy, Amos
Joy and Wilder Joy,

and it all comes down
to the conclusion
of the cardinal: *pretty, pretty, pretty*
pretty — but pretty what?
In her strip search
of scripture, St. Teresa
was seized, *my darling,* rapt
amid the chatter
and flutter of well-coiffed
words, the owl
in the shagbark hickory,
and all the attending dangers
like physicians
of the heard.

SHADOW

I watched you without saying a word.
How could I have spoken? Not even
the tremolo of that creek matched
your noise. Now I speak. It's useless,
you're too much: source, absence, blockage —
sorcery, seance, cage. How else?
Is it that you're all imprint, mime?
I never knew how easy light could be
until I tripped with you —
you undermind. I think you are
the light & the light, that which you make
or makes you, is dark — is it so?
O blank tonnage, O impalpable —
scald me the answer with your coal.

FROM MONUMENT PEAK

Alaska Range, molared & calcitic, all drainage
& archetype — auroras of lichen
blister the scree,
off-shades, staccato & stucco,
nothing but fragments, talus slopes,
heath hunkered in.
Even the Wood River —
no wider than my finger —
uncoils,
flush & gravelbar,
part-download, part-shoulderblade,
a parabola, a cutting through.
Lord, the erosion is everywhere,
the distance always near:
ponds brood in the muskeg,
permafrost two feet under. Shut
your eyes, sleep on it.
The sun's countersunk,
all flute & bone,
and I can hear the hymns of old miners
in the wind, chased with curses.

THE FIELD

I like the field best in winter when it's a giant bug

lying on its back, when its legs

are trees walking through sky. And I know

because they buried you in a field

the bug will right itself in a great spring

wind, dragging limbs through the earth, roots

through the clouds, and though you'll be

gone, I will have lost nothing

for that creature will carry the dead

like eggs to another earth

where they will swarm, and all our

remembering will be invisible tracings

in a familiar wind on a different sky.

TO THE BARDO

I dreamed I finally got through to C on the phone
he was whispering
I couldn't make out the words

he had been in the hospital
and then in a home
M was sick too

You know how in dreams you are everyone:
awake too you are everyone:
I am listening breathing your ashy breath

old Chinese poet:
fire:
to see the way

Doug Anderson

IN CASE YOU THINK THIS IS ABOUT ADULTERY, LET ME SET YOUR FACE ON FIRE

It does not happen as they say, the body
merely sluffing off and leaving light.
No. It's terrible. All those
who came home whole from Troy
now in nursing homes in Argos. Some brat-god
taking back, one by one, each thing they loved.
There is no dignity in this. And so Odysseus
slips from Penelope's warmth in the bed he carved
from a huge tree. Pretending to sleep,
she thinks of the melons she will split
on the courtyard table in the heat of the day.
He steps out into the overcast morning.
She thinks of the Joiner's apprentice,
growing to fit his big hands, wonders
if he's had a woman yet.
He feels the cool sand on his feet,
heaves his shoulder into the boat.
She sits up, hangs her legs over the bed.
He is waist high now in the cold water.
Pulls himself up,
yanks the half hitch, frees the sail.
Rain prickling the swells.
Thunder and surf-crash.
I'll not end with my ass wiped by a servant.
She drags something heavy in from outside.
Stares at the bed. Goes at the roots with an ax.

PETITIONARY PRAYER ON NGUYEN DUY'S ROOF

Saigon, January 2000

Black sky and moon of chipped ice.
We fall on the chicken, the shrimp,
the sliced melons. The whiskey
picks up the neon from the streets.
A sudden breeze cools our damp shirts.
Below, children play in the light
from open doorways.
The heat of the day has made us silent.
Lan Anh, in her simple white dress, pours tea.
God make me young again and not stupid.

READING LARRY LEVIS

Larry Levis, **The Selected Levis** (University of Pittsburgh Press)

January 5, 2001

Here is a new title, from Pittsburgh, comprising work from five books by Larry Levis — all but his last, posthumous collection — selected and edited by his friend, David St. John. It's a welcome title and an excellent selection. Such a volume usually appears in the poet's lifetime, so of course I'm a little depressed and reluctant, reading *The Selected Levis*. Its very existence reminds me again that the poet is gone; there will be no more Levis poems in the world. That makes me realize that while the historicizing world likes closure for artists, fellow artists don't; they take it personally. Who says we should close up shop? There might, always, be just one more customer, one more loitering poem. Critics may welcome tidiness: here comes the Levis canon, closed off, packaged and more eminently discussible, classifiable, shelvable, tamed a little. I find myself resisting that, even in the form this review will take, which I want to make a journal of my reading, mixing in memories, comparing the original volumes with their counterpart sections. What a selected poems does, of course, is allow us to trace a poet's development, the shape and arc of a career in its time and place. I just would rather not think much about the fact that the development and career had an untimely termination. I'd rather think of it as a series of notes I could even share with the author.

This will be a reader's memoir, though, rather than a friend's. I knew Larry slightly, from one visit in California when he was teaching there, a couple of visits to Oberlin to give readings here, and correspondence involving his appearances in *FIELD* and in an anthology of contemporary poetry I co-edited with Stuart Friebert. Our paths sometimes took us far apart, sometimes crossed and converged.

Larry's first book, for instance, *Wrecking Crew*, was in the same series as my own first book. I pull it now from my book-

shelf. We joked, I recall, about the bad designs of those books in the Pittsburgh Series; I remember the publisher was defensive when I criticized them. Mine had a biplane and a snowflake. Larry's had a butterfly and a lantern. We teased each other about trading these objects. I think I probably got to know him first because we shared a prize and a publisher.

For all its date (1971 the prize, the United States Award of the International Poetry Forum and 1972 the book publication), *Wrecking Crew* is very much a book of the sixties. It makes me nostalgic for *kayak* and *The American Review* and *Hearse* and John Logan's *Choice* and Robert Bly's *The Sixties*. The minimalist surrealism of Strand and Simic is much in evidence in Levis' first poems. He had the good fortune to have Philip Levine as a teacher, someone who didn't insist that students march in his footsteps. If Larry could write good poems by picking up on a different style than Levine's, one that was trendy among slightly younger poets, he'd still get encouragement and praise. His opening poem personifies itself, a gesture of reflexivity that was very much a Sixties vogue: "My poem would eat nothing. / I tried giving it water / but it said no, // worrying me."

There's another influence too, and I'm picking it up partly because I knew Miroslav Holub and his work. It's an eastern European sensibility (as is Simic's, of course) that may have come in partly through Levis' associating with Zbigniew Herbert, whom he squired around as a visiting writer in Los Angeles. Born in the midst of war and dictatorship, this artistic stance involves a wry and oblique way of responding to the modern world, laced with irony and understatement, rising sometimes to a kind of desperate joking. Herbert, veteran of a terrible world and history, would have been, one might think, unshakable; instead, he was horrified by what he saw in L.A.; he told Levis the only solution would be to burn it. But Levis was right at home there, ready to ground his poems in his culture's gritty absurdities. In that prefatory poem, his own poem eventually beats him up, takes his money and clothes; it "said Shit / and walked slowly away, / slicking its hair down. // Said it was going / over to your place" ("The Poem You Asked For"). Levis writes of a sky that has the

look of dirty paper, of "forgotten two-by-fours falling off / half-built houses," and his magician persona, while he may recall Mr. Cogito and Holub's shabby sorcerers, is very much of his own place and time:

> And there's a silence as the phone's hung up,
>
> as frank as someone's heels walking out.
> Outside in lightning,
> the palm trees whiten quickly and go bald
> as the fronds crack
>
> in the wind.
> "Eat shit," says someone pushing me away;
> and my father's vanished with a smell of fear and forever
>
> just under his breath in the static.
>
> ("The Magician's Call")

Is it the mark of a young poet that he has put the word "shit" into two of the poems already cited? I suppose so, but it is also the mark of his culture and his trueness to it, his refusal to set up easy transcendences that ignore social realities. That refusal will become a Levis hallmark and one reason we treasure him as a writer of our time.

The magician isn't a perfect persona for the young California poet, but he's a good start. He acknowledges depression and failure, but he also knows that sometimes the magic actually happens, lifting through the smog and dull routine. "The go-go girl yawns" in "L.A. Loiterings," but in being like "the screen flickering in / an empty movie house / far into the night," she hints at possibility. Maybe it's just the *film noir* possibility of those palm trees whitening and cracking in the wind, but maybe it's something more meaningful and lasting.

An exhilarating debut, this book. And it's fun to remember meeting the kind and funny man who put it together. Now I've cheered myself up a little.

In 1977 came *The Afterlife*. I see my copy is inscribed by him on September 22nd of that year, when he came through Oberlin to give a reading. The second book was cause for celebration, all right. It won the Lamont Award and it showed the poet branching out in new directions. The surrealism is now much inflected by readings in Spanish and South American poets; the back cover acknowledges this, mentioning Lorca, Neruda, Vallejo and Alberti, and noting that Levis had been in the International Writing Program at Iowa as a translator. Offhand, I have no recollection of seeing any Levis translations of any of these poets, though.

The poems are longer now, like grave angels spreading unsuspected wings. Humor flickers through them constantly. The reflexive play now involves not only the poem but also the self behind it, questioning, fragmenting, doubling and dissolving. The poet both doubts the self's efficacy and continuity and seems to be questing for its potential stability, its sources in memory and its bleak but steady future. "Signs," for example, begins this way:

> All night I dreamed of my home,
> of the roads that are so long
> and straight they die in the middle —
> among the spines of elderly weeds
> on either side, among the dead cats,
> the ants who are all eyes, the suitcase
> thrown open, sprouting failures.

The protagonist has company here — Wallace Stevens ("The Man on the Dump"), Pablo Neruda, Theodore Roethke, Phil Levine — but he is also alone, walking through a desolate America of his own observing. He finds a token hieroglyphic, like a Romantic poet, a snail shell, "rigid and / cool, a little stubborn temple, / its one visitor gone." Having linked his own homelessness and longing for home with nature, he feels absolved, somehow:

If there were messages or signs,
I might hear now a voice tell me
to walk forever, to ask
the mold for pardon, and one
by one I would hear out my sins,
hear they are not important — that I am
part of this rain
drumming its long fingers, and
of the roadside stone refusing
to blink and of the coyote
nailed to the fence with its
long grin.

Everything's tentative. The voice *might* be heard *if* the world had talismans, special messages. One could be one's own priest, hearing one's own confession and then becoming one with nature. The rain's fingers, drumming, is not a particularly original image, but the coyote is, I think, and its grin outlasts it, like that of the Cheshire cat. This section ends with another memorable image:

And when there are no messages
the dead lie still —
their hands crossed so strangely
like knives and forks after supper.

The crossed hands invoke home by means of supper and help resolve the opening dreams and longings: we are home and the dead are there with us, at rest.

Levis probably should have ended the poem there, but he tacked on one more section:

I stay up late listening.
My feet tap the floor,
they begin a tiny dance
which will outlive me.

They turn away from this poem.
It is almost Spring.

This doesn't work, for me, because too much of it is borrowed. The tiny dance belongs to Robert Bly ("Waking from Sleep") and the reflexive gesture by which the poet and poem detach, the dance outliving the dancer, the human agent returning to the changing seasons, has become too familiar by now. The poet is still a little crowded by his influences, but he is gaining mastery and originality.

January 7

The centerpiece of *The Afterlife* is the long poem, in twelve sections, called "Linnets." It is the most original thing Levis had done to that point, and I still know of no other American poem quite like it. It has its own shape, a spreading anecdote that starts with the speaker's brother killing a linnet with a 12-gauge shotgun. The first three sections are prose. The brother jokes about the killing and then begins to change:

> He grew uneasy and careless; nothing remained. He wore loud ties and two-tone shoes. He sold shoes, he sold soap. Nothing remained. He drove on the roads with a little hole in the air behind him.

We can say we are in the territory of "The Ancient Mariner" here, but the differences are interesting. It isn't just the updating and relocating to contemporary America; it's the fact of the brothers. If one is condemned to insensitive numbness, the other, reporting the story, is condemned to become his brother's conscience, oversensitive and crowded, guilty by fraternal association:

> My gaze takes on the terrible gaze of song birds. And I find that I too am condemned, and must stitch together, out of glue, loose feathers, droppings, weeds and garbage I find along the street, the original linnet, or, if I fail, be condemned to be pulled in a cart by my brother forever.

Eventually the speaker makes a linnet that begins to sing. And the poem begins to spread its own wings, enacting a litany of suffering, human and animal, that becomes an eloquent catalog of a world that wrings our hearts when we let them be open to it. The freedom of movement is both painful and exhilarating:

> Under the saint's heel in the painting,
> a gopher snake sleeps.
> The saint's eyes are syphilitic with vision.
>
> He looks the Lord in the face.
> He is like the bridge the laborers shrug at
> as they wade across the waters at night.
>
> When LaBonna Stivers brought a 4 foot bullsnake
> to High Mass, she stroked its lifted throat;
> she smiled: 'Snakes don't have no minds.'

The poet is working with great confidence and originality here. He doesn't sound like anybody else. And one has a sense that he can dart anywhere, include anything. (The "its" in that last stanza became "it's" in the current Pittsburgh text, by the way: something to correct down the line.)

The story of the two brothers and the linnets continues to thread in and out of the poem, sharing this cataloging tendency, yet keeping a narrative structure alive. As one reads forward, it begins to be clear that this fable of human-animal relationships is also a poem about the Vietnam War. The ninth section, subtitled "1973," makes that clear:

> At the end of winter
> the hogs are eating abandoned cars.
> We must choose between Jesus and seconal
> as we walk under the big, casual spiders whitening
> in ice, in tree tops. These great elms rooted in hell
> hum so calmly.

My brother marching through Prussia
wears a chrome tie and sings.
Girls smoothing their dresses
become mothers. Trees grow more deeply
into the still farms.

The war ends.
A widow cradles her husband's
acetylene torch,
the flame turns blue,
a sparrow flies out of the bare elm
and it begins again.

I'm no one's father.
I whittle a linnet out of wood until
the bus goes completely dark around me.
The farms in their white patients' smocks join hands.
Only the blind can smell water,
the streams moving a little,
freezing and thawing.

*

In Illinois one bridge is made entirely
of dead linnets. When the river sings under them,
their ruffled feathers turn large and black.

To me, this has qualities of greatness. The poet is able to circulate his materials in a dynamic flow of energy, a dance of order and chaos. The way the trees are handled in this section, for instance, and the way the farms recur. And then the materials recurring from other sections, the linnet theme and the bridge theme and the brother's strange travels, costumes and behaviors. It seems to me that Levis is doing what many members of his generation tried less successfully to do, documenting the fissures in our society that also run through the individual self and disappear into its depths. If I could choose only one poem that came out of the

Vietnam experience it would be, oddly enough, this one. This is indeed "The Ancient Mariner" for our time and place, and that's the reason Stuart Friebert and I chose it as the main poem representing Levis in our contemporary poetry anthology, first assembled in 1983.

By the end of "Linnets" Levis is able to operate with an astonishing simplicity. In the last two sections he begins to dismantle (say deconstruct if you must) what he has put together. Section 11 begins, "Until one day in a diner in Oakland / you begin dying. / It is peace time. / You have no brother. / You never had a brother," and ends with the simple declaration, "It never happened." And Section 12 moves to the now-familiar reflexive gesture of the poem discussing itself as a text, a construct, but with an authority that makes it satisfying, beginning "This is a good page. / It is blank, / and getting blanker" and closing with a crumpled page and a declaration by the speaker that he will eventually become "that silence slipping around the bend / in the river, where it curves out of sight among weeds, / the silence in which a car backfires and drives away, / and the father of that silence."

January 8

The poems in *The Dollmaker's Ghost* (1985) are never as long as "Linnets," but they usually take two or three pages to unfold, sometimes in one fluent movement, sometimes in sections. They offer a morose and shadowy catalogue of devastation and suffering, some of it by artists — Weldon Kees, Garcia Lorca, Miguel Hernandez, Zbigniew Herbert, and Edward Hopper each get a poem — and much of it by anonymous Americans, often in the workforce. The results sometimes recall Levine, sometimes James Wright, and the poems are especially satisfying in their willingness to develop a sense of place, sometimes in Spain, more often in California or the Midwest. The humor is muffled, now, while the shifting sense of place helps bring variety, as does Levis' experiment with putting himself as the center of the poem, at the pe-

riphery or beyond, manipulating a persona. The moroseness, though, makes the book somewhat repetitive and monochromatic

I have to pull away from the sentimentality about suffering that Levis seems to be cultivating. None of us wants to be insensitive, but none of us wants to be taken for granted as callous and indifferent. Along with the "More spiritual than thou" and "I suffer more than anybody" habit that poetry can drift into, we have here the "I'm more compassionate about my countrymen than thou" tendency. I believe that the rhetoric can backfire, as in this example:

> To become as pure as I am,
> You will have to sit all day in a small park
> Blackening one end of Fowler, California.
> You will have to stare steadily past the still swings
> Ignored by children,
> And listen to the perfect Spanish of a car thief
> Who knows he will never be caught,
> Who drinks wine alone as he mumbles his innocence
> To a dead sister.
>
> ("For a Ghost Who Once Placed Bets in the Park")

And so forth, for forty-seven more lines. The catalog which this poem embarks on is mildly interesting, but it's fairly easy for a reader to decide that he or she *doesn't* need to sit all day in a small park in Fowler in order to become as pure as the speaker. The spiritual sensitivity masks a kind of spiritual superiority that James Wright, for example, has far too much of for my taste, while I think Philip Levine almost always successfully avoids it. If there's a saving humor or irony somewhere in the vicinity of this poem, it needs a stronger presence.

I guess I have mixed feelings about this book. It's not that it's derivative, or insincere, but that it mostly seems to go along in one easy, plangent direction, and to lack surprise. On the other hand, and to be fair, let me quote one poem that I like, in its entirety:

TO A WALL OF FLAME IN A STEEL MILL, SYRACUSE, NEW YORK, 1969

Except under the cool shadows of pines,
The snow is already thawing
Along this road . . .
Such sun, and wind.
I think my father longed to disappear
While driving through this place once,
In 1957.
Beside him, my mother slept in a gray dress
While his thoughts moved like the shadow
Of a cloud over houses,
And he was seized, suddenly, by his own shyness,
By his desire to be grass,
And simplified.
Was it brought on
By the road, or the snow, or the sky
With nothing in it?
He kept sweating and wiping his face
Until it passed,
And I never knew.
But in the long journey away from my father,
I took only his silences, his indifference
To misfortune, rain, stones, music, and grief.
Now, I can sleep beside this road
If I have to,
Even while the stars pale and go out,
And it is day.
And if I can keep secrets for years,
The way a stone retains its warmth from the sun,
It is because men like us
Own nothing, really.
I remember, once,
In the steel mill where I worked,
Someone opened the door of the furnace
And I glanced in at the simple

Quick and blank erasures the flames made of iron,
Of everything on earth.
It was reverence I felt then, and did not know why.
I do not know even now why my father
Lived out his one life
Farming two hundred acres of gray Malaga vines
And peach trees twisted
By winter. They lived, I think,
Because his hatred of them was entire,
And wordless.
I still think of him staring into this road
Twenty years ago,
While his hands gripped the wheel harder,
And his wish to be no one made his body tremble.
Like the touch
Of a woman he could not see,
Her fingers drifting up his spine in silence
Until his loneliness was perfect,
And she let him go —
Her laughter turning into these sheets of black
And glassy ice that dislodge themselves
And ride slowly out,
Onto the thawing river.

I like the simplicity of the language here. I like the deliberate, meditative pace, and I like the way the first four lines set the scene and mood with emphatic, sure strokes. I like the imaginative engagement with the father; I like the few but persuasive figures of speech (shadow of a cloud, stone retaining warmth, wall of fire, touch of a woman). I like the sorting through of what the speaker does and doesn't know, the toting up of knowledge and mystery. And I like the final image as a gesture of closure that is tremendously open-ended. Levis loved rivers and he used them gracefully, often, and with a confidence born of observation.

Anything I don't like? Hardly worth mentioning. There is "laughter" in nearly every one of the poems in this book, and it almost inevitably means the opposite of amusement. So I wince a

little at that gesture, as I do at the insistent rhetoric represented by the working vocabulary of the book, i.e. *disappear, indifference, own nothing, perfect loneliness, silence.* These words belong in this poem, yes, but they, and words akin to them, recur so often in the book as a whole that they vitiate their own meanings in a way that, say, the river images do not. Still, I find this poem solid, legitimate, beautifully fluent and emotionally moving.

January 9

Now I'm reading *Winter Stars* (1985), a book I realize I didn't know well. Chances are that, not caring all that much for *The Dollmaker's Ghost*, I didn't take the trouble to seek out Levis' next volume. We do that as readers. A good book makes us look for the next one; a weaker book can make us indifferent, so that we miss the poet's recuperation of his or her talent at its strongest. I just love *Winter Stars*. I think its tonalities are richer and its poems more varied. Their confidence isn't misplaced and they unfold beautifully, looking effortless. "The Poet at Seventeen" and "Adolescence," which open the collection, are right on target, funny and poignant, down to earth and yet effortlessly spiritual. It's not that Levis has found his voice — he had a fine voice in the first three books — but that he has learned how to layer the poems in a way that allows his entire sensibility to occupy them, not just the part that seems fashionable or "poetic." There's a relaxing into lyricism of the kind that poets always wish for — we find it in Bishop, we find it in Jarrell and Roethke at their best — and aren't always gifted with. Levis has so thoroughly assimilated his melancholy that he doesn't have to insist on it; instead he can have a good time building a poem carefully, making it complex, resonant, harmonious, polyphonic.

These poems too tend to run two to three pages, sometimes more. I don't quite understand how they manage it, but they are somehow both urgent and unhurried at the same time, reflective and calm but under pressure, driven. It's a wonderful quality that holds even an impatient reader like myself under a sort of spell. I'm unable to decide how to choose even one of them for quota-

tion or discussion. Perhaps the two poems based on the work of Josef Koudelka, the great Czech photographer, would be worth pausing over. The first, "The Assimilation of the Gypsies," is four pages, too long to quote here. In it the speaker studies a photo of a young gypsy being led to his village execution for an ax murder. The speaker is never sentimental about this, and his musings are about the photographer, the village, the executioners, the prisoner; he is gravely attentive and carefully nonjudgmental:

> And it is time now, the two executioners agree,
> That all of this is ended. This is
> *Jarabina. 1963.* And if
> Koudelka tells us nothing else about this scene,
> I think he is right, if only because
> The young man walks outside time now, & is not
> So much a murderer as he is, simply, a man
> About to be executed by his neighbors . . .
> And so it is important to all of them that he behave
> With a certain tact & dignity as he walks
> Of his own accord but with shoulders hunched,
> Up to the wall of the empty schoolhouse;
> And, turning his head
> First to one side, then to the other,
> He lets them slip the blindfold over his eyes
> And secure it with an old gentleness
> They have shared
> Since birth.

The pace and tone of this seem sure and exact, and the layering I spoke of earlier comes in the complexity of assembled viewpoints: the speaker, the photographer, the murderers, the executioners — all are given their space, their due. In a sense the speaker seems to have no choice but to allow this layering. "It is impossible," he remarks later, "not to see / That the young man has washed & combed his hair / For this last day on earth; it is impossible / Not to see how one of the policemen has turned back / To the crowd as if to prevent / Any mother or sister from

rushing forward." Levis' professed inability to have complete control of the material and of his witnessing of it wins us over and enlarges our trust in him.

That trust is rewarded as he then more fully imagines than we would have thought possible the inner lives of people he is able to know only through a still black-and-white image from another part of the world. The poem closes as the two executioners walk home together, conversing about other things in order to avoid what has just happened, and the speaker sees them out of the poem and the world with a kind of measured tenderness:

> As they pass the smells of cooking
> Which rise in smoke from the poorest of houses
> And even from stoves carried outdoors & burning
> As fuel, the cheap paneling of shacks
> Which the government gave them.
> Until it seems that all they are
> Rises in smoke,
> As it always has,
> And as it will continue to do in this place
> For a few more years.

The photographer's art and the poet's art merge beautifully here; there is no real border between them. Perhaps it is Levis' deference to the photographer and the camera that allows his own voice and sensibility to emerge so fully.

The other poem based on Koudelka, "Sensationalism," is even more astonishing in where it goes and what it is able to include. This time the speaker is flooded with a memory of his own, involving the love and mental illness of a woman he knew, and he makes the photograph, of a man crouching on the ground and talking to a horse, a completely believable occasion for that memory's visitation. The enterprise is riskier, in a way, and perhaps a shade less successful than "The Assimilation of the Gypsies," but both poems, like so much else in this book, leave me breathless and wondering, happy and sad.

The poems in this book, as I understand it, were written from

about 1980 to about 1985. David St. John's selection is quite generous, though he reorders the book and, probably because of publishing restraints, has to leave about half a dozen of them out.

January 10

One more book is represented in this selection: *The Widening Spell of the Leaves* (1991). Again, David St. John (whose editorial hand I come more and more to admire as I work my way through the selection and arrangement he has made) has been able to include about two-thirds of it. The poems are longer, many pages, and it's clear that Levis is ambitious to make them more inclusive, more dreamy, more startling in what they do and where they go. But he seems to have lost some of the poise and exactness he achieved in *Winter Stars*. He handles his own presence more fussily and self-consciously, risking self-preoccupation and self-pity. The poems have luminous moments and dazzling juxtapositions, they have rich humor, always a Levis trademark, but they tempt one to skim, to pick and choose. They don't feel as unified, as inevitable. Has the layering gone too far?

The best way to read this book may be to give in to its length and prolixity, to drift on the wide river of words it offers us, page after page, usually in long lines. There is a "widening spell" in such an acceptance, and the book becomes memorable not so much in its individually shaped poems but in its flarings of insight. Rather like *Leaves of Grass*, rather like some of our other poets who find length somewhat irresistible — C. K. Williams, Robert Pinsky, Frank Bidart.

Poetry like this is often built around complicated anecdotes. In "Slow Child with a Book of Birds," for example, Levis starts with an encounter with a child on a bus. The child is showing him a picture of a snowy egret and making what seems a rather sophisticated pun for a child: No Regrets. From the encounter Levis builds a meditation on birds, extinction of species, snow, poetry and a variety of human loss, a swirling, mounting polyphonic mixture of ecstatic and unhappy insight. He brings in Coleridge, he brings in Villon, he brings in crows, he offers some other anec-

dotes. At the close he has reached a kind of lyric pitch that allows him to use "oh" quite a lot:

> Oh & the whispering of snow forever in its
> Undressing & undreaming, & oh the bright
> Meaningless famine in her eyes — each species' —
> Split-second puzzlement at what it is —
> And oh oh the black & white of everything
> Flooding the moment after, so wrong,
> So certain of exactly what it is,
> And not wrong: No Regrets, some food still stuck
> Between his teeth in his off-white, foolish,
> Endless grin, that unrelenting music
> That makes all things a scattering and wheeling
> Once again, the black seeds thrown out onto
> The snow & window squealing shut just after —
> The sudden, overcast quiet of the past tense.

I admire the ambition of this, but I pull back a little too. I think Levis is allowing himself a little too much dilation, expansion. This last section has begun eloquently, then swerved off to another anecdote, about a sexual encounter, before returning to this final crescendo. I think it might have been better without the anecdote, a half to a third its present length. But I acknowledge the interest, risk and enterprise of what the poet is doing here.

Maybe at this moment I'm too enamored of *Winter Stars* to fully appreciate this book. Maybe it will grow on me. I know it's wonderful to have these poems together, and I particularly look forward to more time with the marvelous central sequence, "The Perfection of Solitude." It is really, in some ways, a book in itself.

January 11

This diary must break off rather than end. There is more, much more, to read and think about. There is the posthumous book, *Elegy* (Pittsburgh, 1997), in which the group of poems with "elegy" in the title surely constitute some of the best work Levis

did. "Elegy with the Sprawl of a Wave Inside It," for example, which led off FIELD #50, our 25th anniversary issue, in 1994, and which was, I think, my last contact with Larry, has all the best attributes of what has turned out to be his late work. It is funny, imaginative, relaxed but energetic, darting here and there, risking chaos and summoning order. The poet deprecates his own abilities to handle his material, but like a movie star who does his own stunt work, he brings it off triumphantly. What a joy to know that this poem will always be around, that I will be able to show it to students and friends!

I understand, I think, why *Elegy* wasn't part of this selected poems, and I hope readers know that to have a good sense of the entire arc of Levis' achievement they must have both this *Selected Levis* and *Elegy*. I am grateful to Pittsburgh for bringing out these books, grateful to David St. John for his editing of the former and to Phil Levine for his editing of the latter. Presumably a Collected Levis is envisioned some years down the line.

As for the form this "review" took, I could convert it now to something more conventional, erasing the marks of informality, tentativeness and unfolding recognition that the journal format encouraged. But I still like the idea of an open-ended consideration of this wonderful poet's career and "canon." The story isn't finished. Larry's active in my memory; he smiles back sometimes, obliquely, from the mirror, cocking his head and raising his bushy eyebrows. The journal breaks off, but the reading and thinking and reacting go on. Larry stays among us, partly through these lovely books, still conversing and creating, a vivid presence in our poetry and our lives.

David Young

Peter Klappert, **Chokecherries: New and Selected Poems 1966-1999** (Orchises)

Peter Klappert's fifth book includes poems selected from all but one of his earlier collections, along with new poems — quite a lot of new poems, about 60 pages of them. Such a proportion of new to old is unusual in the "selected-and-new" format and makes it clear the poet has been working on long, complex pieces since his last appearance in print with two books in 1984. Despite its format and the long time span it represents, *Chokecherries* rewards and in some ways demands being read as a single volume, complete in itself. The book is dizzying in its turns from lovely to horrific, intimate to distanced, probing to sensual, manic to peaceful. Perhaps it's that variety that calls for the whole-book reading: no sample would be representative. It's also a matter of the scope of the material. Klappert's imagination is roomy, and at times he sounds as much like a playwright or novelist as a poet.

The twenty-odd pages from his first book, chosen for the Yale Younger Poet award by Stanley Kunitz, show an already mature and versatile poet. The poems are well-made; their often pointed endings make me think of mousetraps, or those trick jack-in-the-boxes with boxing gloves that fly out from opened lids in cartoons. The analogy is about form, not tone, for the poems are pained, ironic, at times cynical; but the loaded last lines in some of them do have a punchline quality. Here are two of the "Three X-Love Poems," a group that has the epigraph "got a wheelbarrow/ plenty of sorrow":

COME HOME! COME HOME!

So much for the holiday.
Wrap the snow up in snow
and put it away. Scrape

the bones down to the bone.

Take a plane home.
Remember to see what

you saw. Having said what you
had to say, make a return
out of staying away.

MORPHEUS, MY ROOMMATE

In heat so thick you can fuck it
bald faces of lovers come swelling
and blossoming back. Hog-white
they erupt from black water and float
on a loitering musk. Great ferns
converse by the sea. Hyla frogs croon.
Swamp water laps at the moon.

Up through the difficult grasses,
through the skulls of old Plymouths,
on the breath of the poisonous river,
under the trestle, down by the depot,
in the streets of this sweaty town,
when every sign in the road
is a twelve-year-old boy or a cop—

Do not look at me like a tired
remorseful mother, like a list
of errands to run. I have come here
to remember, come as a junkman,
a tramp with a wheelbarrow.

Summer rain, summer rain,
I have come to drain the marshes.

The poems are mostly free verse, but there's a well-handled,

wry variation on the villanelle form. The language is casually elegant throughout, and some poems play with language explicitly. "Ostrogoth, Miriam, Loyal and I," for instance, in which the friends lounge in lazy conversation, ends with the line "We are a tetrahedonist."

These early poems also contain some lovely imagery and metaphors, deftly sketched emotional depths, and an occasional surreal moment. They're very peopled: landscape operates in service of the figures rather than being "other." This quality will become even more important in the third book, a series set in Paris just before World War II. Klappert has a lyrical strength that he calls upon in that book, but I wouldn't call him a lyric poet overall — he's too versatile. The selection from the Yale book shows an impressive array of strengths, and he has developed them in ways that could not have been predicted.

*

In the second section of *Chokecherries,* selected from *Circular Stairs, Distress in the Mirrors,* the tone darkens. Irony is more prominent, and more acerbic, in these 14 poems. Here's divorce imagined as a play:

CLOSING IN NEW HAVEN

from the team who gave us Migraine *('64)*
and Stomachache *('71)*

At first the male lead
did the direction, but the cast
rewrote his lines at every run-through.
More recently the dancing duo
hired stand-ins and started
working up routines
for the great proviso scene.
The final act, though blocked
for twenty years, remains a problem
since it requires a division
of the props.

The final curtain
is going up on "The Separation"
after try-outs in a dozen countries
and walk-ons by the in-laws, the blacksheep
and two psychiatrists.
Critics
have called the action
"better than vaudeville" "almost melodrama,"
but claim the plot still lacks
a denouement: for two and a half hours, no one
gives birth, dies, falls in love, or is cured of blindness.

In these first two sections of *Chokecherries* Klappert takes on, with freshness and vigor, some familiar poetic territory: love, the end of love, the making of art, poetry. A poem about a spider suggests that love can be predatory, a poem with the epigraph "after a marble sketch by Michelangelo" suggests that art can be made not in but of anger. "Poetry is where we are," one of the friends in the "tetrahedonist" poem says; "all poetry is war," says another. Surely syllogism is intended — war is where we are.

War in the first two sections of *Chokecherries* is not often literal. In "False Start," for instance, God works on a manikin that isn't fully formed except for the combat boots on its feet. When the war is real, its effects are presented indirectly — a hauntingly effective strategy:

BOY WALKING BACK TO FIND HIS FATHER'S CATTLE

"He is very young and no one
will want to harm him."
—Lao farmer, refugee in Savannakhet

Through a kingdom of spirits in air
through an army in shadows

if the road through the jungle is muddy

the small boy
walking back to Dong Hene, to the clear
familial light

if the flame trees are blooming
if he sleeps for a night in a wat

in that land below language
to find his father's cattle
stops now
for tea, or a basket of glutinous rice
or stops only to look at his feet

if the water jar has been broken
if a river is rising

and starts
again walking

if he finds the five buffalo

now back to Savanne
from his village unsettled in ashes
a place

if the T-28s remain grounded
if rifles doze in the sun

in the mind of his father, who would
were it safe, walk back himself

if his ancestral spirits are there
and are kind

with his son
to Dong Hene where he farms in the past

if he is very young and no one will
want to harm him

through a forest of soldiers.

*

The syllogism about war turns out to be predictive: Klappert's third book, *The Idiot Princess of the Last Dynasty,* is set in Paris in 1939 and 1940. It's a series of persona poems in the voice of a legendary figure, Dan Mahoney, a gay Irishman posing as a doctor. In his notes Klappert describes Mahoney as "vulgar and queeny," "a fringe member of the expatriate set living on the Left Bank. . ., well-known in the cafes, witty, garrulous, hirsute and masculine, given to obvious make-up and flauntingly camp mannerisms." *The Idiot Princess* uses the form of a dramatic monologue as Mahoney addresses a rag-tag assortment of characters in a cafe, some of whose voices enter the poem.

A daunting persona to take on, we might think — a man of bitter wit who has lived through one world war and who now camps and clowns, despairs and declaims, on the edge of the second, doom's hostage commentator. But the voice plays furiously well on the page, registering the gathering darkness with grim acuity, with intelligence, and with a sense of history. While "Doc" Mahoney speaks in varied moods, he always has a great deal of rhetorical control.

And the question is of those without the voice,
of women without men, harnessed to wagons
or pushing long barrows, women armed
with hatchets gathering kindling in the Bois.
Of old mothers sitting long in entries
smelling indelibly of cabbage
and of a stripped equestrian carcass in the gutter
prostrate of a personal famine and dead eight to haul. . . .
and of a tough cud on her campstool
watching one more convoy
of midget coffins to Pere-Lachaise.

I see. . .
those with a few liter jars
full of the Bank of France
blessing themselves
as they fatten a yellow cat for Christmas
and I see them
serve it like a bird in sausages
surrounded with brewery mice.

The notes, which are useful and necessary, tell us that during the famines caused by sieges of Paris in the 1870s, people ate zoo animals and their own pets, and could buy two grades of rats in butcher shops, brewery and sewer. The notes also tell us that Mahoney interests the poet less than history itself does. That may be, but Mahoney is, for all his bawdiness and banter, a moving character who gives history "a local habitation and a name." Wars have their theaters, and Mahoney knows how to play to an audience. And while the story that belongs to all of the listeners in the café dominates *The Idiot Princess*, it is made more powerful, not less, by smaller scenes, such as Mahoney's pursuit of an attractive boy meatpacker, comically delayed by two old women who "stupidly stood there / like a matched pair of Guernseys."

One of the longer excerpts here comes from "Estienne," a poem named for Mahoney's sickly young poet friend that includes conversation between the two men, remembered for the café audience. Estienne is an earnest foil to Mahoney's disillusioned clown:

"Oh Danie," he answered,
"you hear the tenor of my argument
but not the counter-tenor straining
against uneasy laughter toward a finer sound.
You understand my diction, but can you hear
my contradiction, the philos beneath the logos
—My Lord! What's *that!*
Le Bon Dieu, I suppose, turning His other cheek."

The interruption by gunfire is a good example of the play-like

quality of *Princess:* the reader often forgets it is a monologue because the memories, anecdotes and characters are so vivid and affecting. Nothing is static as Mahoney's voice guides us quickly from one "scene" to the next.

The last we see of Estienne, he is "already measured for wooden pyjamas" but retains his hopefulness:

> "We know the world
> will rise again in April
> in all its glorious redundancy,
> but it rises for us only
> if we fight the world all winter,
> for *we* are April's precondition.
> Light,
> the only light comes from each man
> rubbing against the darkness,
> though a soft and a sulphurous match
> that man might be.
> I'm not clear what I
> can do about God.
> Try not to hurt Him, I think, stay alive,
> I think, in His rare and expensive sunlight."
>
> Yes, and one other thing, Estienne.
> After confession but before absolutiion,
> try to dare to remember to say
>
> "Je te remercie."

The simple language with its mixture of tenderness and blasphemy surprises. Forgive God? Movement in *The Princess* is not only among scenes — it is metaphysical as well as physical.

Mahoney's attitude toward his own homosexuality is complex. Another section of "Estienne" gives us a scene that is at once explicit and restrained, self-accepting and self-condemning. (According to the notes, "yegg" is a traveling burglar, "gunsel" a violent hood who preys on homosexuals, and "gooseberry lay" the stealing of linen hung out to dry.)

PONTIUS MAHONEY

No matter who is using the body
I return to the scene of the crime,
and like a narrative of the grave, the plot
lacks complication.
I have kicked
away my shoes and bitten a cushion.
My arm becomes a stranger
standing in the room, unbuttoning,
leaving a skin of trousers on the floor.
His hand goes for the light and in the dark
I know again the brief, unutterable
perfume of the stick the sack the cup
and the pillar thrilling into my hand.
With the lids of my eyes half-drawn, I see
most clearly: it is one whose name I never knew,
one, perhaps, whose figure, back-lighted
by a mist of stars, had seemed
translucent as a letter from a lover.
Oh, he may have been no more than a yegg
or a gunsel, and our pause together
a gooseberry lay — but *this* is my striptease,
and when I give the air my mouth
I can taste what he is saying.
Then the clock
comes back, the fact that never changes,
the old reproof. On my elbows I lean
and stare across the bed
into a land of shadows in the mirror.
And I go to the sink like Pilate.

*

The issue of homosexuality is one that Klappert deals with extensively in another, more recent long poem, excerpts from which comprise much of the last section of *Chokecherries*. Between *The Idiot Princess* and the newer long poem is a short section of

uncollected and new work, which opens with "Kilometer Zero." That poem begins

> What was wanted?
>
> One's own voice
> finally, flat-out
> like the music of a beaver.

Hard, of course, not to read that opening against *The Idiot Princess*, just a page-flip back, especially in light of the metaphor of "kilometer zero" and its suggestion of starting over. The poem then goes its own startling way, to wish not only for a voice but for other things (finally, for "a page of one's own in Death's little black book"). But those first few lines prompt the thought that a book in persona, involving considerable research, presents — more than a looser collection — some difficulty for the poet who must leave it behind and adjust to a different voice, time, and place.

Many of the uncollected poems that follow are short (some short enough to invoke Martial); many are witty or outright funny.

> CRAFT LOST IN TEXAS
>
> The poet and all
> six passengers of
> a small poetry reading
> were lost late last night
> when they went into
> a dive outside of Houston.

*

While *The Idiot Princess of the Last Dynasty* is spoken by a persona, the collection-in-progress excerpted in the fifth section of *Chokecherries* takes the form of a journal. The poems of *Scattering*

Carl are very much on the page, and even talk to themselves about that fact ("Why not a real diary?"); the drama is more interior, more intimate. It is set in "the landscape of the mind," a small artists' colony, but because of Klappert's rangy mind the world is essentially as large as it was in *Princess*: quotes from eclectic reading and comments on them enlarge the poem well beyond the tiny literary village. *Scattering Carl* moves gracefully between poetry and prose, and shifts forms in other ways, becoming, for instance, a never-to-be-sent letter or a commonplace book commenting on a wide range of subjects (including itself). The journal is sometimes paragraphed, sometimes quirkily lineated, sometimes in the form of conventionally lineated poems.

In his notes, Klappert describes the stance of *Scattering Carl* as "fictional autobiography. . . something like the journal I might have kept in 1978 — but it is an invention. . .populated by real people and invented characters." The explanation becomes part of the form; without the notes, a reader would take the "I" of *Scattering Carl* to be the garden-variety "I." We read poems knowing that the speaker is not the poet, exactly, but that the poet often draws from the life at hand. And most poems don't press the issue. But *Scattering Carl* does, and the effect is quite odd.

Part of the oddness is that this long poem, while as varied as *The Idiot Princess*, is at times intensely personal. And the notes make it clear that many of the details are indeed autobiographical: the writer is a poet working at Virginia Center for the Creative Arts on a book about Mahoney; he then conducts some probing self-examination about the difficulty of leaving that book behind ("physically 1978, mentally 1940") and about his homosexuality. It's hard to read poem-plus-notes and retain the sense of a fiction.

The most personal passage here, "The 50-minute Hour," takes the form of a letter to "Dear Marion." The notes, which include references to both "I" and "the speaker," supply the information that "Marion" is Dr. Marion Hoppin, "a Jungian analyst (she had been a student of Jung's) and one of my closest friends."

All of this leaves me a bit puzzled. The notes read as if Peter

Klappert were introducing himself in the persona of — Peter Klappert. The notes for *The Idiot Princess* are enormously helpful; those for *Scattering Carl* seem to me distracting. The poem can speak for itself, and does so in many voices. It's full of play and hard work: playfulness around language, especially Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang;* serious play around ideas from de Beauvoir, Stafford, Carver, Freud, a book on French culture, and other reading; and work in the form of difficult self-examination.

Homosexuality is a recurring theme, explored from various angles. Insights arise at the cultural and personal levels, and about the interplay of the two. This theme becomes intensely personal and affecting in "The 50-minute Hour": self-therapy, perhaps, and a brilliant piece of prose. Unfortunately for this review, its most powerful passages do not lend themselves to being excerpted. Rather than the compression of poetry, its virtue is the slow building, paragraph by paragraph, of one story relating to another, of the observations that then arise, of the linking of those observations into understanding.

As personal as *Scattering Carl* seems to be, it is also an occasion for something else. Just as Klappert was interested less in the person of Mahoney than in history itself, it is clear that in this long poem he is concerned not only with the circumstances of a particular life but in something larger, something about one's awareness of being human. About the process of using that awareness — its meaning something we make, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes with much deliberation.

I came to see *Scattering Carl* as the monologue of a large mind lounging and conversing among its selves, proceeding at the leisurely pace of a novelist, making all sorts of connections and providing the material for the reader to make even more. The description of the writer's early relationship with his father gives some insight into why war fascinates him: "There is the picture of me when I could barely stand, up to my knees in my father's combat boots and wearing only a field cap and a diaper." In a later photo, father, uncle and speaker-as-child are all in uniform. "When would that have been? He was *Newsday's* first photogra-

pher and entered the service late. When did he go off to basic training, when was he home, when was he sent to film the Nuremberg Trials? What I recall seems later, and he seems distant after the war." This is a child for whom war had a personal, if indirect, effect, competing for the "attention" of the father, and apparently winning. The writer goes back to earliest memories, as many of us do, in search of meaning; but reading *Scattering Carl* it is impossible not to think also that Klappert visited 1939 in *The Idiot Princess* as another route to his origins, probing the world as it was just before he entered it — the world of his father, the origins of his origin.

The last excerpt from *Scattering Carl*, seven sections from a poem called "Eight or a Dozen Meditations on a Barn," is my least favorite. Klappert may have intended to create a quietness in the last pages, an occasion for the reader to rest after what has been, after all, a series of intense experiences. My interest doesn't survive the length and number of the descriptions and the flatness of some of the language. This reaction may be intensified by contrast: this is really the only point in *Chokecherries* that I don't find eloquent, compelling, or rewarding in some way.

*

Peter Klappert is an inventive, obsessive, restless poet. The title "Scattering Carl" and the cover art of *Chokecherries*, with its photo of the poet's face in four images that overlap but are separated by black frames, may both be acknowledgments of his restlessness, his not being satisfied with the poetry of our time (as he says in *Scattering Carl*), not even his own. It's interesting to note that the titular Carl was an artist in residence at VCCA, an "indigent, older, autodidact poet who was killed the next year by a hit-and-run driver," and that "'Carl Woods' was the last in a series of pseudonyms he used." The levels of persona are many.

What territory Klappert might take on next is not at all obvious. Many poets have a somewhat linear development — not that their newest book is predictable, but it fits earlier work by being similar in some aspects of style or subject. Peter Klappert's books

don't display such a stepping-stone pattern; as I said at the beginning of this review, one of the virtues of *Chokecherries* is that it shows the poet's scope in a way that none of his individual volumes can. One can only predict that whatever Klappert publishes next, it is likely be as original and powerful as *Chokecherries*.

Pamela Alexander

NINE TIMES OUT OF TEN

Ho Xuan Huong, **Spring Essence**, translated by John Balaban (Copper Canyon)

In "What Were They Like," a poem written during and in response to the Viet Nam War, Denise Levertov adapts a futuristic stance and offers a series of questions and answers about a people and culture now destroyed. "Did they have an epic poem?" the interviewer asks. "It is not remembered," an historical voice answers. "Remember, / most were peasants; their life / was in rice and bamboo."

The full irony of the poem is probably not apparent to most American readers even today. As Levertov knew, there is a Vietnamese epic, *The Tale of Kieu* by Nguyen Du (1765-1820), a 3,254-line poem frequently recited, in full or in part, by Vietnamese people. Also well known is Du's contemporary Ho Xuan Huong, an educated "second wife" or concubine whose work similarly but often indirectly reflects the political and social upheaval of early nineteenth-century Viet Nam. Huynh Sanh Thong (whose English translation of *Kieu* appeared in 1983) translated and published twenty-one of Ho Xuan Huong's poems in his 1996 *Anthology of Vietnamese Poems*, and interest in her is strong among Vietnamese, overseas Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-Americans; just last year, Nguyen Ngoc Bich published (in Vietnamese, out of Vienna, Virginia) a comprehensive compilation of the poems (*Tac-Pham*), with notes summarizing all related research done outside of Viet Nam.

But prior to the publication of John Balaban's *Spring Essence*, an exquisitely presented collection of forty-nine of Ho Xuan Huong's poems which translates her given names for its title, this work has been virtually unknown to American readers. If the ideal translator is always a thoroughly bilingual poet, Balaban is probably as close to that ideal as Vietnamese poetry gets from the American side. A poet who has written memorably about his years in Viet Nam, first as a conscientious objector during the war and then as a researcher gathering and translating the folk poet-

ry (*ca dao*) he published in 1980, Balaban is probably unique among American poets in knowing the language well enough to translate without the constant help of a native speaker. He worked on Xuan Huong for over ten years; two of the translations first appeared (one in an earlier version) in his 1991 collection *Words for My Daughter*, and it's clear from his introduction, notes, and bibliography that he has done a good deal of research.

While the notes are addressed to the reader, not the scholar, it's important to say that the book itself is a scholarly landmark. Written in the Chinese-character-based *Nom* script that has since been replaced by the Roman-alphabet-based *quoc-ngu*, Xuan Huong's poems have usually been reproduced in the latter. *Spring Essence* is the first book, ever, to reproduce *Nom* typographically, a process which, as Balaban notes, is "a crucial first step toward retrieving the vast heritage of Vietnamese literature in *Nom*."

The result is as elegant as it is monumental: both *Nom* and *quoc-ngu* versions appear on the lefthand page, Balaban's English on the right. The presentation foregrounds at least some formal aspects of the poems, which are written in the eight-line *lu-shih* form adapted from the Chinese, or sometimes in its four-line variation. Even a reader who does not know Vietnamese can easily recognize the seven-syllable line in the *Nom* version, while the one repeated rhyme is apparent (in lines 1, 2, 4, 6, 8) in the *quoc-ngu*. Balaban occasionally re-creates the rhyme scheme exactly, in some of the four-line poems and in the poem he calls "Confession (I)":

> Gray sky. A rooster crows.
> Bitter, I look out on thickets and folds.
>
> I haven't shaken grief's rattle, yet it clatters.
> I haven't rung sorrow's bell, though it tolls.
>
> Their noise only drags me down, angry
> with a fate that says I'm much too bold.

Men of talent, learned men, where are you?
Am I supposed to walk as if stooped and old?

In other poems, Balaban creates his own scheme of rhymes and off-rhymes; "Cats," which has extra rhymes in Vietnamese, is one example ("From tooth and claw they never cower. / Who can tell which nipped the other?"). More frequently, a roughly accentual line and occasional rhymes and off-rhymes — often at the ends of the poems — convey something of the formal sense of the original, as does the couplet form in which the English (but not the *quoc-ngu*) is presented.

Xuan Huong's meticulous prosody reveals one aspect of the classical training that allowed her, remarkably for her time, to address and challenge the "men of talent, learned men" she refers to in the poem above. A number of poems discuss the position of women more boldly. "On Sharing a Husband" complains about the fate of the concubine ("If I had known how it would go / I think I would have lived alone"), and other poems focus on the unwed mother, the widow, and, more generally, "The Condition of Women" ("Sisters, do you know how it is? On one hand, / the bawling baby; on the other, your husband // sliding onto your stomach").

But astonishingly modern and outspoken though such poems seem, the most impressive pieces in this collection are those in which double entendres are so skillfully handled that Xuan Huong is, as Balaban says in the Introduction, "composing two poems at once, one hidden in the other." The poem that "hides" is most commonly "a sexual design that reveals itself by pun and imagistic double-take," which makes these pieces, on one level, simply a lot of fun. Here is "The Paper Fan":

Seventeen, or is it eighteen . . .
ribs? Let me have it in my hands.

Thick or thin, opening its lovely angles.
Wide or narrow, inserted with a stick.

The hotter you get, the more refreshing.
Wonderful both night and day.

Cheeks juicy soft, persimmon pink.
Kings and lords just love this thing.

Often, as in this poem, the two meanings inhere so equally in a single image, situation, or scene that it is impossible to say whether the poem is "about" its stated subject or its sexual one. It's difficult to think of many poems in English like this; examples that come to mind are poems by William Carlos Williams like "Queen-Anne's Lace," where a field of flowers is so thoroughly imbued with human desire (or is it the reverse?) that it is impossible to separate the description of them from that of a woman's body. Or "Young Sycamore," a poem that simultaneously describes a tree, makes it grow, and ages it, achieving all of this primarily by the infusion of more than a suggestion of human sexuality. Williams speaks somewhere of the value of imitating nature, whereby we become "part of the process," and something similar seems to be happening in Xuan Huong's poems. Some of the more fanciful objects given sexual meaning are human-made ones, like the paper fan; elsewhere it's human activities (weaving, swinging) that are presented as both innocent and suggestive ("Swingposts removed, the holes lie empty"). But many of these poems focus on natural objects like the jackfruit ("Caress me and sap will slicken your hands") and the river snail ("Kind sir, if you want me, open my door. / But please don't poke up into my tail"); others, even more impressively, commemorate landscapes.

That the landscapes are to be appreciated for themselves is clear not only from what we know about Xuan Huong (she was a traveler) and the geography of the poems (many of the scenes they describe are identifiable), but also from the nature of the language, which often echoes other Vietnamese and Chinese landscape poems. Here is "Three-Mountain Pass":

A cliff face. Another. And still a third.
Who was so skilled to carve this craggy scene:

the cavern's red door, the ridge's narrow cleft,
the black knoll bearded with little mosses?

A twisting pine bough plunges in the wind,
showering a willow's leaves with glistening drops.

Gentlemen, lords, who could refuse, though weary
and shaky in his knees, to mount once more?

It's difficult not to find an echo of poems like Tu Fu's "T'ai-Shan Mountain" in the last couplet, and it's impossible not to believe that there is an actual place behind the poem (which Balaban in fact identifies); but we don't really need to know about the traditional genders of pine and willow to find human sexuality in this poem as well. It's like the classic Gestalt drawing that is now a goblet, now two profiles, depending on the angle of perception; once the poem is known, the two poems within it become inseparable.

The imagistic doubling is often enhanced by verbal play, and even, in the Chinese-based characters, visual play. Many of the puns or near-puns are based on tonal echoes (Vietnamese has six tones, indicated by diacritical marks which this review cannot reproduce), others on reversals of syllable-patterns. These are of course untranslatable, and must be explained in the notes; what is remarkable is how frequently and successfully the two meanings are conveyed by image and the suggestive language of careful translation alone. Sometimes Balaban seems to have worked to find imagistic equivalents for linguistic puns. In the last line of "Tavern by a Mountain Stream," for example, he appears to be compensating for the fact that an obscene meaning (*leo lon*) hides in a reference to a twisted kite string (*lon leo*) by nudging the image toward suggestiveness with the addition of a wonderfully inventive "up":

Leaning out, I look down on the valley,
path winding to a deserted inn,

thatch roof tattered and decayed.
Bamboo poles on gnarled pilings

bridge the green stream uncurling
little tufts in the wavering current.

Happy, I forget old worries.
Someone's kite is struggling up.

That there are "old worries" should not be forgotten in any consideration of Xuan Huong's work. Balaban has nicely organized the book so that most of the "double" poems appear in the first half; but gradually the book moves toward broader explorations of society. The book takes us from sexual double entendre to sexual complaint, in poems about women and widows; but then there are poems about men as well ("Village Schoolmaster," "Retired Doctor," "Young Scholars") — poems that, in their depiction of ordinary members of society, suggest another aspect of Williams' poetry. These are followed by poems about monks, nuns, and pagodas, some of them lamenting the decline in Buddhist practice ("The monks no longer beat the temple drum. / The nuns just say their beads and then are gone"). These poems lead, yet more broadly, to a consideration of the nation's history and its present fallen condition, as in "Tran Quoc Temple":

Weeds sprout outside the royal chapel.
I ache thinking of this country's past.

No incense swirls the Lotus Seat
curling across the king's robes

rising and falling wave upon wave.
A bell tolls. The past fades further.

Old heroes, old deeds, where are they?
One sees only this flock of shaved heads.

To read such laments for the poet's country in the context of poems that simultaneously celebrate both the landscape that comprises it and the bodies that inhabit it is to experience a vision that is itself both double and hopeful. For what survives the corruption of ruined temples, missing heroes, and rusty coins ("gather enough, you'll get your goals") is the unbreakable connection between people and place. That this connection is deeply imbedded in and yet transcends sexuality is perhaps the ultimate challenge these poems offer to western readers. As Balaban points out, Xuan Huong would have been a Buddhist in spirit, despite her awareness of the corruption within Buddhist institutions. The poem he quotes to illustrate this is the poem with which he ends the book, "Spring-Watching Pavilion":

A gentle spring evening arrives
airily, unclouded by worldly dust.

Three times the bell tolls echoes like a wave.
We see heaven upside-down in sad puddles.

Love's vast sea cannot be emptied.
And springs of grace flow easily everywhere.

Where is nirvana?
Nirvana is here, nine times out of ten.

Translations of poems from cultures we know little about come to us, it seems to me, as good news. That such news can travel to us from distant times as well as places is one of the virtues of poetry. As Xuan Huong says, "A bell is tolling, fading, fading / just like love. Only poetry lasts."

Martha Collins

DOUG ANDERSON teaches writing and performance at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. **Blues for Unemployed Secret Police** (Curbston Press) is his most recent book.

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ANGIE ESTES' book **The Uses of Passion** (Gibbs Smith, 1995) was the winner of the Peregrine Smith Poetry Prize. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Paris Review, TriQuarterly, Shenandoah, Green Mountains Review, The Antioch Review, Chelsea*, and in the anthologies **Queer Dog** (Cleis, 1997), **The Geography of Home: California and the Poetry of Place** (Heyday, 1999), and **Extraordinary Tide: Contemporary Poetry by American Women** (Columbia UP, 2001).

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JOSIP PUPACIC (1928-1971) was a Croatian poet and editor as well as a Professor of Croatian Language and Literature at the University of Zagreb and, later, at the University of Lyon. During his short life he published several books of poetry and achieved fame with his last book, **My Cross Still Burns**. A few months after the book was published, Pupacic's life ended tragically in a plane crash that also killed his wife and a daughter. His translator, GORAN TOMCIC, a native of Croatia, currently lives in Oberlin where he is a Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Allen Memorial Art Museum. **Fragile**, his first poetry book, was published in Zagreb in 1991. His poems have also appeared in many magazines in English.

KAREN RIGBY is currently a senior at Carnegie Mellon University. She has been published in *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette* and *Three Rivers Review.* A

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HEATHER SELLERS' collection of short stories, **Georgia Under Water**, is forthcoming from Sarabande. She's the winner of an NEA fellowship this year.

JACK STEWART was educated at the University of Alabama, the University of California—Davis, and Emory University (where he received his doctorate). From 1992-1995 he was a Brittain Fellow at the Georgia Institute of Technology. His work has appeared in *Poetry, The Gettysburg Review, The American Literary Review, The Dark Horse Review,* and other journals and anthologies.

JAMES TATE's newest book is **Memoir of the Hawk** (Ecco Press, 2001).

ROBERT THOMAS is a native of the San Francisco Bay Area. His poems have appeared in *The Iowa Review, New England Review, North American Review, The Southern Review, Shenandoah,* and other journals. His manuscript **Plush Fire** has been a finalist in the National Poetry Series.

JEAN VALENTINE is the author of eight books of poetry, most recently **The Cradle of the Real Life** (Wesleyan, 2000). She lives and works in New York City.

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JONAH WINTER has had recent work in *Ploughshares, Mudfish,* and the Pushcart anthology. He supports himself as a writer and illustrator of children's books.

ALI YUCE is a retired teacher of English in Turkey. He is the author of fifteen books of poems including **Boyundan Utan Daragaci** (Shame on You Gallows), **Asilacak Kitap** (Book to be Hanged), **Tas Tanrilar** (Stone Gods), **Siir Sicagi** (Warmness of Poetry), a novel, several books of poetry for children and a book of nonfiction on poetics. A translation, **Voice Look Puppet: poems by Ali Yuce**, will be available in fall 2001. About his translators: GERRY LAFEMINA is the author of three chapbooks and two full-length collections of poetry: **23 Below** and **Shattered Hours: Poems 1988-1994**. SINAN TOPRAK was born in Bursa, Turkey, and moved to the United States in 1983. He teaches government, international relations, and comparative politics at Kirtland College in Northern Michigan.

POST CARD

John Carlisle as Oberon and Richard McCabe as Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1989 Season

ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY SERIES 10 NUMBER 332

Photograph by Geraint Lewis

$700
ISSN: 0015-0657